

# Exhibiting Mozart – Rethinking Biography

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**Abstract:** *The article analyses the new permanent exhibition in the composer Wolfgang A. Mozart's apartment in Vienna, opened in 2006, from the curator's perspective. The exhibition presents an approach to biographical display in which the exhibited person becomes part of a multifaceted web of contexts, and the article argues for the active deployment of the polysemic character of objects as a means of grasping the complexity of a person's biography. Presenting a concept for the Mozart exhibition that merges semiotic and cultural theories with the materiality of the objects on display, the article contributes to the discussion as to what constitutes authenticity in museum exhibits, and in particular in memorial spaces, and discusses alternative approaches to the traditional predominance in display of original objects in biographical exhibitions. Moreover, it argues for the productivity of going beyond dichotomies between theoretical and applied museology.*

**Key words:** Memorial rooms, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, biographical exhibition, exhibition analysis, theoretical and applied museology, authenticity, cultural heritage.

## PRELUDE

In the late summer of 2005, I walked through the luxury apartment in Vienna's first district in which the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart had lived with his family for two and a half years, from 1784 to 1787. The apartment was closed to tourists, awaiting refurbishment and renovation for the upcoming celebrations of Mozart's 250th birthday in January 2006, and it had been stripped of all objects that previously had reminded the visitor of the musealized status the composer had entered into. The apartment thus swayed between

evocations of the thriving activity when the Mozart family had lived here and recollections of the respectful stillness in which visitors had admired the physical remains of his abode. Walking through the empty apartment, I became aware of the atmosphere that still cluttered the rooms despite their being devoid of any personal belongings, imagining in vivid terms Mozart's daily life more than 200 years ago. Questions of authenticity, of reconstruction and of representation wove across the empty space and filled it with images of Mozart as seen through the lens of the 21st century.

## GOING BEYOND

While the gap between theoretical and applied museology has become smaller in recent years, and the interaction between these two forms has met growing interest in both academic and museum communities, there still exists a strong tendency in museological literature and practice to separate the two. Practical exhibition work, with its popular appeal to heterogeneous visitor groups, is in this discourse often considered as opposite to analytical theoretical work with its peer-dominated readership. While putting things on public display admittedly implies a process which follows different rules from those of textual academic research, I would argue that these two approaches stand in a productive, mutually dependent relationship, and furthermore, that this is a relationship that deserves much more active exploration in the future. This article attempts to show the productivity of bridging – or rather, of going beyond – the gap between theoretical and applied museology. Indeed, one may say that exhibition work reaches beyond an artificial dichotomy of theory and practice (Klein 2004: 19) and that each exhibition is a statement of an implicit museological theory; it is a theoretical statement formulated using the rhetorical devices of exhibitionary display.

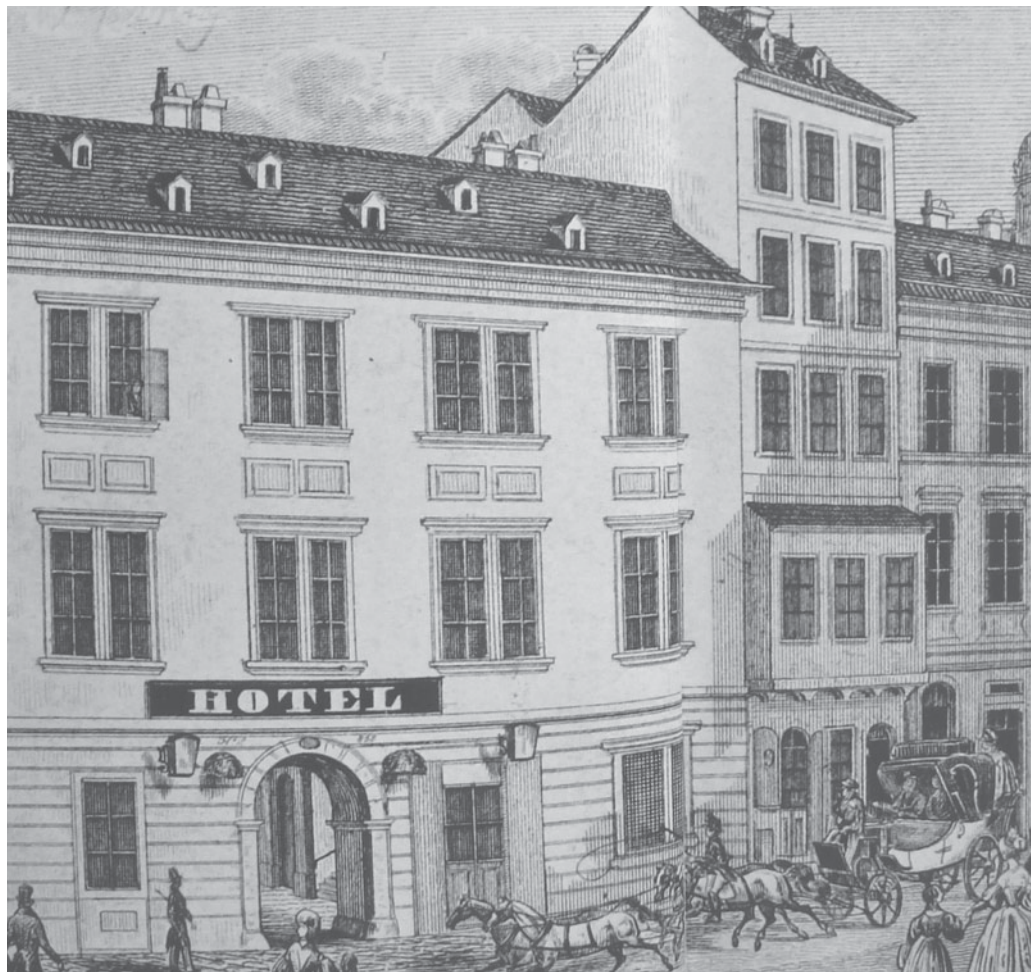
The theoretical inspiration for this article derives mainly from semiotic approaches and theories on cultural heritage. Applying semiotic readings to exhibitions has a long tradition, stretching from Barthes to recent cultural semiotic, social semiotic and multimodal approaches (e.g. Scholze 2004, 2010; Stenglin 2009; Pearce (ed.) 1994; Bal 1996; see also Muttenthaler and Wonisch 2006). On the practical side, most museum curators will let

semiotic ideas influence their work, as the question of the relationship between artefacts, their materiality and their (historical or spatial) contexts is part of any exhibition process. Equally, the increased number of tourism and cultural heritage sites in the 20th century has led to a constantly growing literature on these topics. In the rest of the article I will show how these approaches may be used to both analyse and create biographical exhibitions.

The sign in the centre and around which the following discussion circles, is the new exhibition in Mozart's apartment in Vienna which opened in 2006. Werner Hanak-Lettner outlined the basic concept; Wolfgang Kos, the director of Wien Museum, and I were co-curators.<sup>1</sup>

The new exhibition in the apartment was part of a greater project, the Mozarthaus Vienna, to be opened to the public on 26th January 2006, Mozart's 250th birthday. The apartment, situated in the centre of Vienna, right behind St. Stephen's Cathedral and on the first floor – the upmarket *Beletage* – consists of six rooms and was the largest and most expensive apartment which Mozart inhabited during his years in Vienna. The *Beletage* was considered to be the best floor to live on, and was usually reserved for people of wealth and high social status. Mozart moved in with his wife Constanze and his baby son Carl Thomas in September 1784. He was at the height of his success, and he was to stay at this address for more than two years, until April 1787.

Parts of the apartment have been used as a museum since 1941, the 150th anniversary of Mozart's death, and have been administered for the past decades by the Historical Museum of the City of Vienna, today's Wien Museum (Stalzer and Spring 2006: 8–12). Until 2006, the museum had been limited to Mozart's



*Fig. 1: Schulerstraße 8/Domgasse 5, Mozart's apartment (first floor in the tall building to the right of the hotel), early 19th century. Photo: Wien Museum.*

apartment, but with its becoming a part of Mozarthaus Vienna, the exhibition space now includes two more floors, not counting the two underground floors which are used for temporary exhibitions as well as musical and other events. While Wien Museum was re-

sponsible for the contents and the design of the exhibition in Mozart's apartment, Wien Holding, a municipal enterprise with a focus on cultural projects, arranged exhibitions in the two upper floors, focusing on Mozart's ten years in Vienna – from 1781 until his death in

1791. This article concentrates on the actual apartment.

### BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIONS

Biographical exhibitions usually start with a shortcoming – the physical absence of their subject/object. Curators have to circulate around their subjects, not being able to grasp them completely, only being able to exhibit their contexts. In memorial houses,<sup>2</sup> curators can choose between various approaches with which to narrate the history of their subject, with the most common one consisting of a museal display of the person's life based on personal items. If the person's furniture also still exists in abundance, one may opt for the faithful reproduction of the subject's rooms at a given time. This approach has both advantages and disadvantages. While efforts to reconstruct space as still lived-in may create a strong sense of authenticity for the visitor, this concept nevertheless risks freezing a single moment in the subject's life, hindering further interpretation or insight for the visitor. Many museums choose to focus on the person's personal belongings across time, placing them in the context of the subject's life and historical circumstances. Again, there are numerous display forms, ranging from those with an exclusive focus on the subject's life, and risking the presentation of a hagiography, through those which allow for connections with other contexts and people, and to those in which the curators invite the visitor actively to share their interpretations. The latter strategy is an extension of what Richard Holmes (2002: 16) has called "comparative biography", an approach where writing or telling a person's life story is always already considered to be an interpretation, with every writer, reader or visitor adding new perspectives.

In museum exhibitions, the question of the so-called authentic nature of the displayed objects has a long tradition. I add the attribute "so-called", as the question of what authenticity consists of has been under scrutiny in recent decades, in particular in debates on cultural heritage (Boorstin 1987; MacCannell 1999; Cohen 1988; Wang 1999). In general terms, one can speak of three main types: *objective authenticity*, i.e. original objects or testified copies; *constructivist authenticity*, i.e. culture as a social process providing no definite way of describing what constitutes the authentic; and finally, *existential authenticity*, where authentic feelings emerge as part of one's experiences, one's identification with the outside, with nature, etc. (Wollan 1999: 286–290). While researchers have critically re-evaluated ideas of authenticity at cultural heritage sites, including museum display, museum exhibits still rely to a great extent on the traditional interpretation of authenticity as objective. Most curators and museum visitors will agree that the knowledge of actually being in a room where a famous person had lived, or looking at an object which had been in the person's possession, has a specific sensual quality and constitutes one of the major strengths of a biographical exhibition. However, the two other forms of authenticity, in particular the existential one, play into the visitor's meeting with the exhibition as well.

What happens, however, when there are no authentic objects, i.e. personal belongings available? Indeed, one of our drawbacks as curators of the Mozart exhibition was that there are only few objects left that belonged to Mozart or his family. Mozart died at a time when the societies of enthusiasts which became common during the 19th century had yet to be established. While there were efforts after his



*Fig. 2: Exhibition in Mozart's apartment, 1940s. Photo: Wien Museum.*

death to take care of his musical production, his personal belongings were sold by his widow in order to make ends meet. With only a few belongings still existing and the Mozart Year fast approaching, it turned out to be impossible to loan any of the few still existing personal items for a longer period. While the Internationale Stiftung Mozarteum, to which the Mozart museums in Salzburg belong, had been collecting personal items for years, Wien Museum only has three in its collections: a letter allegedly written by Mozart, a keyhole cover from one of his earlier apartments and

only one item where we are completely certain of its authenticity, the apartment itself. The question was how to represent biography without biographical items? While there rightly has been a discussion on the usability and necessity of authentic artefacts in museum exhibitions (more recently, see Agrell 2009), biographical exhibitions are a specific medium with their own rules and the expectations of the visitors to see authentic objects here may be stronger than in other exhibitions. However, the lack of personal belongings might be an advantage as well, as it opens a space of ex-



perimentation and museological reflection on what actually constitutes a biographical exhibition. The first step taken by us, and building on the concept of the previous exhibition by the architect Elsa Prochazka, was to define the apartment as a biographical object in its own right. In other words, not only did the exhibition become an object itself (Agrell 2009: 41) but also the surrounding space, acknowledging the exhibition's position as a performative space, being placed at the intersection of the narratives provided by the curators, the apartment, the visitors, Vienna, Mozart, etc.

#### PERFORMING BIOGRAPHY

The notion of a biographic reality or even unity is an illusion; questions regarding representation and interpretation are always part of any biographical narration (Albano 2007: 21). Bourdieu (1986) shows that efforts to create a chronological sequence of the individual's life out of certain moments which – with hindsight – are construed as having been crucial in determining that life, are based on an idea of life as linear and independent of other social groups and historical events. According to Bourdieu, this approach neglects the person's various positions in different fields, i.e. a multiplicity of contexts giving different possible interpretations.

Attempts to reconstruct Mozart's life in this apartment along a line of major events would thus have risked giving the impression of a linear, may be even teleological, storyline. It would have risked neglecting Mozart's multiple social positions and identities – as composer, as husband, as father, as son of the renowned music teacher Leopold, as friend to fellow musicians such as Joseph Haydn, as teacher of young Johann Nepomuk Hummel (who lived

in his household for some time), as master of his servants, etc. Rather than narrating a sequence of events that happened in Mozart's biography, the focus moved to his *life* in the apartment, limiting the display to the two and a half years he lived there. Mozart could thus be placed into a network of social contacts which permeated his life throughout the whole period of his living here, and which he continuously helped to constitute.

This kind of narration differed from previous museum displays in Mozart's apartment, which until the 1990s had been dominated by a historicist approach.

Historicist approaches have the advantage of suggesting "authenticity" and of providing the visitor with the feeling of time travelling. However, this is at the same time their drawback as their efforts to recreate the past suggest the possibility of an authentic reconstruction of the available space. Thus, in the case of the Mozart apartment, the displayed furniture may suggest that they were owned by Mozart and had been placed into this particular room. At the same time, very few exhibitions are purely historicist; in this case, the painting on the right is from a later time and the quotes on the wall inscribe the room into the exhibition space. A very different way of representing biography was employed by the architect Elsa Prochazka, who for the exhibition in 1996 devised so-called "Möbelgeister" (furniture spirits), modern, stylized versions of period furniture which referred to the absence of original pieces in the apartment (Prochazka [1996]; [www.prochazka.at/projects/musiker](http://www.prochazka.at/projects/musiker)).<sup>3</sup>

The approach chosen for the exhibition in 2006 did combine aspects of both display forms, while simultaneously trying to go beyond the limited space of the apartment by referring to events and life outside it. It tied on

64 to the former exhibition, but questioned more explicitly the role of authenticity in museum space. We described our approach thus in the museum catalogue. Visitors are to encounter the spirit of the place at Mozart's apartment. "Yet what does a concept like 'authenticity' mean? What is fact, what is fiction? Such questions were not to be avoided; instead they were to be addressed actively and playfully. Atmosphere or information? Reconstruction or deconstruction? Either option represents both an intellectual as well as practical challenge for museum curators." (Kos 2006: 21).

Very little is known about the function each room had when Mozart lived there. We know with some certainty where the kitchen and the main entrance were. For anything else, we have to guess or rely on sources such as visitors' memoirs or archaeological findings. Mozart's apartment thus becomes representative of our knowledge of the past: patchy, selective and often arbitrary. In recent decades, discussions on the curator's role have critically examined his or her anonymous voice in exhibitions: the contents and the message of the exhibition tend to be represented as objective, as an authoritative truth to the visitor. Possibilities to encounter this include the naming and positioning of the exhibition's team or the active involvement of the visitor in the creation process of the exhibition, e.g. by interactive modules. Alternative approaches regard the exhibition as a performative space in which the messages the curator wishes to convey and which the visitor reads into the exhibition can never be fixed once and for all – they will always stay arbitrary to a certain extent. Werner Hanak-Lettner (2010: 105-109) speaks of the curator as an invisible team player ("Mitspieler") who provides the visitor with texts and objects. Yet the real encounter takes place



*Fig. 3: Exhibition in Mozart's apartment, late 1990s.  
Photo: Wien Museum.*

between the visitor and the exhibit in a form of an inner dialogue, with the curator losing the dominant role ascribed to him or her.

In Mozart's apartment, we defined the exhibition as "an open game with recognisable rules" (Kos 2006: 23). In other words, we decided to make the knowledge gaps explicit and to ask the visitor to partake in the curators' search of a better understanding of Mozart's life. Based on both our knowledge and our interpretation, each room was assigned a certain function that constituted the heading of the main text of the respective room. A question mark placed behind each label: "bedroom?", "dining room?" etc., a typographic image in its own right, shows that this function was by no means certain and that the curators are only able to convey an impression of what the room could have been used for at Mozart's time. In the first room, a scale model of the apartment with the adopted functions of each room spelt out further stimulates the visitor to make his or her own interpretation as to the functions of each room. The authentic space of the apartment thus stands in an ambivalent relationship with the uncertain and recon-

structed memories and ascriptions of its rooms.

However, not only the rooms' functions, but also their appearances during Mozart's time are uncertain. The visitor is reminded of this by two videos, one showing an extract from Milos Forman's *Amadeus* (1984), the other from Karl Hartl's *Mozart – Reich mir die Hand, mein Leben* (1955). Both sequences show a scene set in the very apartment where Mozart composed his opera *Figaros Hochzeit* – in other words, the apartment the visitor is in at the moment. The films display very different pictures of what the apartment presumably had looked like, the US–American film using much more frills and display of wealth than the Austrian–German one 30 years earlier. To these two very different images of the apartment is added a third: the way the apartment looks today. Although this is the “real thing”, it still includes traces of a reconstruction – in the 19th century the apartment had been divided into three flats, walls and addi-

tional doors had been built. In the 21st century, a lift had been introduced, functioning as both exit and entrance into the museum shop. The visitors thus are invited to imagine Mozart's reality here – just as the film directors had to do.

### COMPOSING AN APARTMENT

Objects in a museum acquire their meaning not only through their material quality and their original use, but through the meaning assigned to them by the curator and the visitor. Indeed, one may say that objects lose most of their original function as soon as they enter a museum's collection (Scholze 2004: 19), and in exhibitions they convey a spectrum of meaning through the juxtaposition with other objects. To any object there are attached codes and subcodes that are deciphered according to the observer's personal situation or the specific context the object is displayed in (Eco 1994:



Fig. 4: Scale model of Mozart's apartment. Artist: Augustin Fischer. Photo: Mozarthaus Vienna/David Peters.



66 134). An exhibition such as the Mozart exhibition attracts people from all over the world and of different backgrounds, and thus naturally opens itself to a variety of interpretations. A challenge and ambition in exhibitions is to allow for multiple associations and interpretations on behalf of the visitor, while at the same time to offer an easily accessible and readable storyline. In the case of Mozart's apartment, the objects on display tell the story of Mozart's life while he lived there, while at the same time opening up for associations with his environment, the 18th century and our own perspective on the composer and his time. Their arrangement, the form of display chosen, also influences the dialogue between curator, exhibit and visitor. Jana Scholze distinguishes between four presentation forms: the 19th century systematizing serial presentation (*Klassifikation*), the linear and chronological order of mainly historical museums (*Chronologie*), and the simulation of authentic context as common in open air museums (*Inszenierung*) (Scholze 2004: 27–28). The presentation form chosen in the Mozart apartment resembles the one Jana Scholze (2004: 28) calls *Komposition*: "In den Ausstellungen werden [...] alle Präsentationsmittel sowie der Raum in das Spiel mit Zuweisungen und Deutungen einbezogen. Die Folge sind assoziationsreiche Raumgestaltungen, welche nicht vordergründig die ausgewählten Objektbeziehungen thematisieren, sondern mittels dieser auf abstrakte Inhalte verweisen bzw. diese problematisieren." [In the exhibition [...] all means of presentation as well as the space itself are involved in the play of references and interpretations. The results are association-rich spatial arrangements, which do not thematize ostensibly the relations of selected objects, but rather use them in order to refer to abstract content,

or to problematize them. *Translation by the author*]. However, since these four forms function as a typology, most exhibitions will have traces of all or some of the other forms as well. Indeed, one may argue that playing on these approaches will best do justice to the rich and complex settings and associations of objects.

The exhibition in Mozart's apartment quotes practices of *Inszenierung* through the use of so-called time-pieces, i.e. a particular object from Mozart's time which represents the theme of each room.

These time-pieces refer to several contexts. Firstly, they signify the presumed function of the room: a porcelain fruit bowl represents the dining room, a chair the visitor's room, a bed the bedroom, etc. An element of irritation is inserted through the form of display used. All time-pieces, mundane as they are, are placed onto a podium made of metal and are protected by glass. They thus play upon the assigned function of the room, while at the same time their enshrinement invests them with a significance that makes them stand out from the rest of the room. The material used – metal – signifies that the objects, though all from the late 18th century, do not really belong to this specific apartment, thus challenging the notion of objective authenticity. In addition, the time-pieces may acquire meanings extending beyond the 1780s and invoking the role of the rooms as part of a museum. The chair, for example, refers to the visitors' experience in a museum, where sitting down and contemplating the surrounding constitutes an important part of the visit.

Other contexts conveyed by the time-pieces are Mozart's life in the 1780s and bourgeois culture in Vienna of the late 18th century. The time-pieces were all manufactured during the late 18th century and thus represent



Fig. 5: Exhibition in Mozart's apartment, 2006.  
Photo: Mozarthaus Vienna/David Peters.

through their design and material a specific period and culture. They locate Mozart as a member of a distinct social culture, with one time-piece, a candle stick holder, indicating that the family was wealthy enough to employ their own servants. In fact, the Mozarts had three – a cook, a scullery girl and Mozart's personal servant Johann. In addition, they contribute to “debunking” a wide-spread myth – that of Mozart's impoverished life.

By playing upon the polysemic character of the time-pieces as variously metaphor, metonym and synecdoche, we wished to open up a variety of interpretations and associations which transcend the walls of the apartment in time and space. Rather than being positioned solely in the apartment itself, Mozart's life is now placed at the intersection of various cultural and social influences, expanding the limited space of the apartment. At the same time, the apartment re-emerges as a space located in the 18th century as well as the 21st. The view out of the gaming room window becomes an object in its own right: the street

outside has changed little since the Mozarts lived here. Hence, the visitors can imagine being in the 1780s while at the same time being rooted in their own presence – reminded of it not least by electric lights and a road sign. The desire for objective authenticity – manifested not only in the street view, but also in “time windows” showing the different wall paints used in the apartment during the centuries of its existence – interacts with other forms of authenticity.

#### MIMESIS OR MIMICRY?

One of the central questions of authenticity in biography concerns the actual look of the subject. The biographic genre is heavily based on mimetic representations of its subject. Monuments, book covers, and paintings portray the person in question, creating visual images for posterity, making the person “real” to the reader or onlooker. This poses a particular challenge when representing persons who lived before photography emerged as a mass medium. In these cases, knowledge of the person's physics usually is patchy and unreliable, something which tests people's desire for the “real”. In Mozart's apartment, the visitor encounters Mozart *in persona* several times. Underneath the main text in each room there is a small shelf, with coloured figurines made of plastic perched on it. The figurines, designed and made by Christian Jauernik (anapuls), correspond with the text above them and refer to the life supposedly carried out in this room more than 200 years ago.

They represent the main protagonists of each room, with Mozart as main character being present at all times, others including his wife Constanze, his baby son, his friend Joseph Haydn, his servants, but also the family

68 pets – a dog and a bird. The figurines do not aspire to one-to-one likeness; rather they appear distorted, strangely comic, referring to the incomplete picture of any biographical representation. Colours mark the affiliation of the various figures, with the Mozart family in signal red, his pets in yellow, his servants in non-descript grey, and his friends and visitors in light green. Each figurine is placed on a pedestal with its name inscribed, thus playing with the visitor's expectations of heroic protagonists and with Mozart's double role as musical genius and family man. Moreover, the figurines suggest that in this apartment every single person was a central protagonist in his or her own right (even the pets!) and worth his or her own monument. In addition, the democratic presentation of the apartment inhabitants (figurines) may make possible identifications on the part of the visitors and thus a

feeling of “being there”, playing on associations of existential authenticity.

While the figurines on the shelves are meant to humorously show the subjective basis on which we build our heroic images – and indeed any museum display (the figurines looking like toy figures) – in another part of the exhibition, Mozart's supposed study, we approached the general difficulty, if not impossibility, of creating a mimetic image of the biographic subject.

There were only very few pictures of Mozart made during his lifetime. However, there are numerous images based on some knowledge of his person or on the imaginings of subsequent generations. The major component that these pictures – mainly lithographs – have in common is their rich imagination and wide breadth in their depictions of Mozart, e.g. a lithograph made in the 1860s portrays Mozart

*Fig. 6: Figurines in Mozart's apartment. Artist: Christian Jauernik, anaplas. Photo: private.*





*Fig. 7: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart by Leonhard Posch, a friend of Mozart's, 1788. Replica. Photo: Wien Museum.*

as a beautiful romantic hero. This last example refers to the situatedness of any portrait – a portrait is part of its temporal and cultural context and has also to be viewed as such (Lindinger and Doppler 2006: 10).

In Mozart's presumed study, a number of these portraits are placed on the wall, suggestive of a portrait gallery. They are some of the last objects the visitors meet on their tour through the apartment and thus serve also as a point of reflection. Visitors may now once again see the variety of images that exist of Mozart – after already having encountered those decided upon by the curators and after having made up their own images. However, to prevent an impression of relativization through repetition, a notice discloses which

portraits in all likelihood were made during Mozart's lifetime and which were made after his death. The "authentic" images thus serve as basis for comparison with the other images and again, with one's own images.

#### WRITING (ONESELF INTO) TRADITION

A biographical exhibition informs about the person's life, usually illustrated or represented by his or her personal belongings. The visitors to the Mozarthaus Vienna learn about Mozart by starting on the third floor, with Mozart's friends and life in Vienna in general, moving down to the second floor, dedicated to the music he composed in Vienna, and then on to his apartment, the subject of this discussion. However, in regard to his personal belongings, one is aware of their obvious absence. And people can indeed be disappointed when they discover that the exhibited artefacts are not Mozart's or that the apartment has not been reconstructed in order to create a more or less faithful image of the past.

During the ICOM conference in Vienna in 2007, a group of museum employees visited the exhibition. One résumé reads: "Utstillingen vakte svært ulike reaksjoner blant [...] deltakerne. Enkelte følte seg provosert over det de betraktet som en fragmentarisk presentasjon, mangel på 'tidsånd' og alminneliggjøring av 'geniet'." [The exhibition aroused very different reactions amongst the participants. Some were provoked by what they saw as a fragmentary presentation, a lack of 'zeitgeist' and a banalization of 'genius'. Translation by the author] (Guttormsen 2007).

This criticism was articulated by museum employees working with or interested in historical houses. Their need for more atmospheric display touches upon existing expectations

70 of biographical exhibitions which are displayed in “authentic” space: the desire to literally feel authenticity, the original, *zeitgeist* or aura – whatever one wants to call it. It also opens up broader questions concerning the display of biography: should “the genius” be placed in the centre of attention? After all, a person who merits his or her own museum stands apart from other people, and this exceptionality motivates visits to his or her home. However, as discussed earlier, this focus entails the risk of presenting identities of a person as clear-cut, as homogeneous, and neglecting the fact that any person’s life is embedded in a complex layer of contexts which in turn constitute his or her identities. This criticism also touches upon questions concerning the way we (as curators and visitors) perceive exhibitions and, moreover, what constitutes exhibitions. Is it the objects on display, or is an exhibition much more, also including the building structure as well as our expectations and imaginings? In the past decade, the exhibition space has increasingly been integrated into the exhibition concept; Siepmann (1995: 185) even sees a major task of the museum in the construction of spaces. Exhibitions extend beyond the display of artefacts; the objects interact with the surrounding space, open for new perspectives and unexpected associations on behalf of the visitor. In the case of Mozart’s apartment, the actual exhibition *is* the building and its structure, especially since there are no other “authentic” objects. It is the process of walking through the rooms – despite their renewed appearance – that constitutes one of the main authentic and auratic experiences.

A visitor survey done by Mozarthaus Vienna in 2008 on the museum, including the two upper floors, shows that the criticism expres-



Fig. 8: “Mozart” by P. Rohrbach, 1863. Photo: Wien Museum.

sed by the museum employees echoes that by other visitors. Even when one takes into account the many positive comments about display and concept, it is noteworthy that a major criticism was levelled at the lack of authentic objects (Besucherbefragung 2008). One conclusion could be that many people rely on material objects in order to imagine the past and that their museum experience is closely tied to the presentation of and immersion in authentic objects. Yet, interestingly, the first results from an analysis of visitor books in Franz Schubert’s and Ludwig van Beethoven’s memorial rooms indicate that visitors mainly are looking for the atmosphere; there are comparatively few comments on the exhibitions



themselves but many on the actual fact of *being* in his home (Visitor books 2005–2009). In these admittedly very atmospheric museums, a number of original objects are displayed, albeit without any historicist touch. Do they satisfy the visitor's desire for authenticity and let him or her concentrate on other aspects of visiting a genius's home? Johann Strauss' apartment has, on the other hand, many original objects on display; indeed, one may still imagine him living there, with the rooms appearing to be more home than museum. Here, in contrast to Schubert's and Beethoven's visitors, comments on the exhibition prevail. Paradoxically, the knowledge of being in a museum rather than a home appears here to become stronger exactly because of the many original objects and furniture on display. Returning to Mozarthaus Vienna and particularly Mozart's apartment, it is striking that the issue of atmosphere appears to take up comparatively little place in the visitors' comments: positive comments concern the display, the layout, the information provided, negative ones the overload (or lack) of information – and the absence of authentic objects. Very likely, this has to do with the appearance and marketing of Mozarthaus Vienna as an event museum. One tentative conclusion could be that people expect a more traditional museum setting in memorial rooms which are part of a greater museum space, while in memorial rooms which retain the impression of a private home (such as Schubert's and Beethoven's apartments) the focus might rather be on the atmosphere conveyed by the setting of the apartment and its surrounding. This ties in with Djupdræt and Hatt's (2009: 62) observation of the close connection between the layout of the exhibition space and the visitor's emotional experience of the exhibition. In the

case of Strauss' apartment, the display of furniture and other original objects appears to meet many visitors' expectations as to what a memorial place should look like, with the atmosphere possibly being an integral part of the total experience.

Wien Museum does indeed own two objects by Mozart which are registered as "possibly original" in its collection catalogue, and both items are accordingly displayed in the exhibition – though admittedly not without being tongue-in-cheek. One is a dedication supposedly sent by Mozart to Haydn – with the handwriting and paper quality however indicating a much later date; the other is a key-hole-cover, alleged to be from the apartment where Mozart lived as subtenant of Constanze's mother before their wedding. The cover was removed from the door in the 1890s when that house was torn down. Displaying these two objects plays upon expectations of authenticity, and moreover refers on a meta-level to a museum's desire to collect personal belongings regardless of their character, of preserving the past as a sanctuary for times to come.

The apartment is, however, not only imbued with remembrances of Mozart's life; it has also had a history of its own, after the Mozart family moved out in April 1787. It was refurbished and renovated, and at some time during the 19th century subdivided into three small flats, each with its own entrance. The apartment was not made into a single unit again before 1976. Even though there exist many reports of visitors making pilgrimages to the "Figarohaus" as the Viennese called it, it was not until 1941, 150 years after Mozart's death, that parts of the apartment, consisting of one of the three flats, were opened to the public. The opening ceremony took place as

part of the grand Mozart celebrations in Vienna and other places in the Third Reich, praising Mozart's genius as a German composer. The National Socialist politician Baldur von Schirach opened the exhibition and propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels visited the exhibition shortly afterwards (Spring 2007).

The new exhibition which opened in 2006 thus followed on from an uncomfortable tradition, and carried along with it the history of the apartment as a public memorial reaching at least back to the Nazi regime. It was not only the history of the apartment during Mozart's time we hence wished to evoke, we also had to relate to the history of the memorial which we, the curators, partly built upon. By showing a series of photographs of exhibition displays, starting with the opening in 1941, we not only traced the history of the apartment, but also located ourselves and our mode of display in a certain tradition of biography and museum history. The process of defining something as a memorial is not created in an empty space; rather, it is always the result of certain political, cultural, and economic interests. Each memorial therefore has a history which interferes with the history of its primary object. Every new history one tells of one's subject – through new exhibitions, for example – adds to this history, confronts and challenges it.

#### EXHIBITING BIOGRAPHY

Memorial rooms and biographical display have a long tradition in the history of the museum, and interest in these forms of exhibition appears to be growing rather than declining. This longstanding tradition means that there is a variety of possible approaches, and that there are many ways to renew or recast bio-

graphical exhibitions in historical space. However, the dominating display form is embedded in efforts of mimetically representing the life of a genius or hero. In the Mozart exhibition presented in this article, we wished to critically explore and broaden this tradition; we decided on an open, playful approach, on placing the everyday rather than leading events of a genius's life in the centre of attention. Through the exhibition, we made the argument that Mozart was situated in many different cultural and social fields and cannot be reduced to one single position or life story. By implication, we make the same theoretical argument about biographical exhibitions in general. Visually, the multiple images of Mozart displayed towards the end of the exhibition refer to the many narratives told by him and by others of his life. By allowing for the polysemic character of any object, it became possible to draw in various contexts within which the Mozart family acted. By choosing to exhibit objects both as evidence of the 1780s and of the curator's interpretation of 2006, the question of authenticity was introduced and interfered uncannily with the only properly "authentic" object on display, the apartment itself. While here authenticity was retained, the ascription of authenticity became unreliable and opened up a space of ambivalence. The response of the visitors – partly positive, partly negative – shows the challenge of displaying biography as an associative and imaginative process rather than as a representation mediated by original artefacts.

#### NOTES

1. In addition to being one of the curators, I was also the project manager of the new exhibition. Lichtwitz – Büro für visuelle Kommunikation /

propeller z was responsible for architecture and graphic design. Some exhibition furniture from the architect of the previous exhibition, Elsa Prochazka, was integrated into the new exhibition space. See also the catalogue of Mozarthaus Vienna: Stalzer (ed.) 2006.

2. The term “memorial room” or “memorial house” is problematic as it evokes associations of sacral space and solemn commemoration of the dead. Wien Museum has therefore in the last years gone over to call its memorial museums of composers “musicians apartments” (“Musikerwohnungen”). In order to emphasise the commemorating aspect of these museums, I have nevertheless decided to keep the word “memorial rooms” in this article.
3. Prochazka devised similar exhibitions in the seven other municipal musicians’ houses.

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